An explanation of the three E's in email
Effectiveness; Etiquette; Ease.

By Anne Scarlett, Printed in Modern Steel Construction

At 6:50am, I wrote: *"Rats! Kevin must have misunderstood our main point that we presented in last week's meeting. Now we'll need to revisit the topic yet again. This might set us back by a week or longer."* Then I hit send, at 6.51am.

Uh oh. Wait a minute. Did I just send that note to my internal colleague as intended? Or, did I send it to the person that I was referencing within the note? As I clicked my cursor onto the Sent Items folder, I discovered what I already feared: I had sent the email to the wrong person. In my haste, instead of forwarding the note, I had replied to the original sender, aka the client. Panic. Dread. Tummy ache. Now what do I do? I picked up the phone and called the client immediately. He was already at his desk, but had not yet read my note. I explained my message. While he was certainly taken aback, he handled it professionally. In this case, I lucked out. That client could have responded negatively. Instead, he opted to just move forward. But I learned an important lesson…one that has stuck with me for a full decade. Email is permanent. Just like any other online/electronic footprint, we must take special care to respect the sticking power of this medium.

So what are the best ways to use email? In addition to being uber-thoughtful and checking things twice before sending them (including double checking the recipients!), here are some email best practices: effectiveness, etiquette, and ease.

EMAIL EFFECTIVENESS:

1. **Meaningful regarding line.** With thousands of emails in our email systems, we want the ability to search for email at a moment's notice. If you want your email to get attention, and you want the ability to track it later, then include a regarding (RE) line that is clear and specific. Sure, it can be clever now and then, but it can't be so esoteric that it becomes lost. Regarding line examples:
   a. Effective: Reports for planning retreat are DUE on July 3, 5pm.
   b. Less effective: Reports due.
   c. Not effective: Hello team! Or {blank}.
2. **Identify action items versus FYI.** At the very top of each email, let individuals know if they are just copied on a message, or if they need to take some sort of action. Example: Frank: FYI only. Jamie: Need answer by Friday.
3. **Summarize content.** Preface any longer email with a very short executive summary (2-3 sentences) of what it contains. Enable the reader to take a quick glance, and make his own decision about when or how he wants to read the remainder of the content.
4. **Organize content.** Use headlines and bullets to increase the readability of your email. Admittedly, it's not the best idea to play with multiple fonts in emails, as they do not consistently translate from computer to computer. However, you still want to make smart formatting choices (bold, italics, etc).
5. **Consider attachments carefully.** If an email becomes longer than two paragraphs, it may be time to use an attachment instead. The pro to attachments is that they can be made to be far more readable, and you can put them on letterhead. As well, attachments can then be filed as a more official document, especially if it needs to be included in a particular project file such as 'project correspondence' or 'bidding documents'. The con to attachments is that they are hard to open from mobile devices, and it also takes an extra click or two to get them downloaded, saved, and opened on your computer. Sometimes, to appeal to a myriad of readers, I'll put the content in the body of the email as well as in a

pretty attachment. Just be mindful of who you are communicating with, and try to play into their specific preferences.

EMAIL ETIQUETTE:

Circling back to my email blooper that I shared the beginning of the article, we must take special care on how the receiver will 'read into' our messages. You already know that ALL CAPS MEANS YOU ARE SHOUTING. and all lower case is just plain lazy (albeit, tempting!) especially when sentences just run together. like this. You also know that emoicons (smileys and other 'faces') might help to ensure there are fewer misunderstandings, but they are not fool proof. But did you know that:

1. **Meeting in-person still trumps all.** Your best bet, if you are in doubt about potential misunderstandings, is to go ahead and meet with the person face to face (or by skype, if out of town). Body language is subtle, but powerful, and you'll be able to truly connect with the other individual(s) in a way that email will never attain.
2. **Ask the recipient about their communication preferences.** How do they prefer to receive information? In private; in writing; through face-to-face discussion? For your clients, you are going to have to adjust to make their experience of working with you as pleasant as possible.
3. **Choose recipients carefully.** Sometimes you copy someone to make sure they are 'in-the-loop'. Other times, you don't copy them because you realize they are busy and you don't want to flood their in box. Make it a practice to directly ask the person how much they do---or do not---want to be copied on items that only indirectly related to them. Further, when you are replying to someone, be thoughtful when 'replying to all' versus 'replying to one'. Every company culture and client-provider dynamic is different; you have to determine what makes the most sense.
4. **Respond within 24 hours.** It would be great if all of us could respond to our email and voicemail within 24 hours. So far, every suggestion I have made is one that I also put into regular practice, except this one. I wish I would respond in 24 hours, and yet this is something that I still need to work on. To make up for this fault, I often write back to say 'I've received this and need to give it some thought. I'll get back to you by xxx." Just so that they know I'm not ignoring them. It helps, but I do want to be better at email responsiveness. And so should you!
5. **Use it as a tool in combination with in-person or voicemail.** If you've left a voicemail for someone, you are welcome to mention that you'll follow the message up with an email, at which time you can expand upon your thoughts. This combination gives the recipient the option to respond using either medium. It's their choice.

EMAIL EASE.

Email, and typing in general, can be rough for all of you tortoise-typers out there. Because you want to remain professional, you cannot have typos in your email any more than you can have typos in any other business documentation. Further, you need to be a good writer, or you'll lose them. But this all requires time, and if you are a slow typer, you're sure to dread composing emails. Here's a couple of ways to make it easier:

1. **Invest in dictation software.** I've heard rotten reviews for MacSpeech Scribe and Dragon Dictate for the Iphone. However, I've read that Dragon Naturally Speaking for your computer gets things about 70% right, and continues to improve over time. With the right headphones and a proper setup (including adding industry jargon to the software dictionary), this type of software can translate your words into typing so that you'll just be responsible for editing and refinements. You will get the best results if you are articulate, and if you have clarity of message and thought prior to using it.
2. **Save good email content, and re-vamp it for future recipients.** Let's say that you've prepared an email for a client, letting them know what they should plan to bring to a project kick-off meeting. What's wrong with using that same email as a starting point for a different client? You can put the main body into your draft items, and have it on-hand for the next time you need it. Just take extra special care to customize the content and re-read it one last time before sending to ensure that it is appropriate for the next recipient.

Think about this. When people see that they've received an email from you, do you think they look forward to reading it, because they know it will be succinct and spot-on, or do you think they dread getting emails from you because they are sloppy, long, or incoherent? Do your own self-assessment on your grasp of email best practices, and refine them as needed.

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